

A 19th Century Immigrant's View of Lowell: The Letters of John Wood, 1858-1860

An Exhibit by Helene Desjarlais

PATRICK J. MOGAN
CULTURAL CENTER



University of Lowell
Center for Lowell History
September 5 through October 31
Monday - Friday, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Saturday 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

40 French Street, Lowell, Massachusetts

A 19th Century Immigrant's View of Lowell tells the story of John Wood, a cabinet-maker from Bury, England who immigrated to Lowell in 1858 and lived here until his tragic death in 1869. The letters and other historical documents on exhibit help to tell the story of one man's life and what he observed around him in Lowell during the mid 1800's.

The Historical Background

In 1980, Kenneth Walker of Prestwich, Lancashire, England, sent to the Mayor of the City of Lowell, three lengthy letters found among his late sister's effects. These letters were written over 120 years earlier by John Wood, an Englishman living in Lowell in the mid-1800's, and sent to his family in Bury, England. They eventually found their way to the University of Lowell Center for Lowell History, where they remained undisturbed for another ten years. A chance mention of John Wood's letters touched off a project that now reaches from Lowell and the Merrimack Valley to the cotton manufacturing towns of Lancashire, England. Three elderly fourth-generation descendants of John Wood have recently been located. One is currently living in Lawrence, MA and the second in Oxford, England. The third woman, Edna Bickerdike Dally, lives in Freckleton, a small village near Preston in West Lancashire, and has provided us with some early information on John Wood. Mrs. Dally's grandmother, Ann Wood, was John Wood's niece, and was one of the "*family of girls*" referred to in the letters.

Through extensive research conducted locally and in Bury, England, a more complete portrait of John Wood has emerged. We now have much information regarding his early years in England, the reasons he immigrated to Lowell, where he lived, worked and worshipped, the events in his life after his last letter of 1860, the impact of the Civil War years upon his life, and the events leading up to his tragic death in 1869.

The Letters

Wood's three surviving letters, dated November 21, 1858, May 1, 1859, and January 22, 1860, offer a rare intimate glimpse into the life of a male immigrant in Lowell during the mid-1800's. Some of his observations and impressions of Lowell, reproduced as he wrote them, are included here.

In his letter of 1858, the engraved heading of which appears below, John, writing to his brother, marvels at the appearance of the mills and the female factory workers:

"I never saw such a place for females as Lowel is in summer you may see them coming from the mills with there vails of blue green or black wich the all wear and parosols and as neat and clean as if the where going to church in the mills in every room there are washstands with iron wash bowls in rotation with water taps sinks and all complete."

"...I was in the Merrimack Corporation....I can assure you the look much more comfortable here in the mills than home every one has a stool ore chair to sit upon and watch there work and likewise all provided with a looking glass where you may see them stand combing thier hair at the glass and straighting up themselves as if in a bedroom...."

Lowell Letter Paper.

WITH A VIEW OF THE CITY.



He was very impressed by the number of churches and religions in area, among them the nearby Shakers:

"...they get thier livelyhood by making some kind of cakes that the bring into Lowel and other place they dress much like the Quakers and when the meet for worship the form in rotation along the meeting house Men on one side and Women on the other as if the was going to dance a country dance and then commence to walk backward and foreward facing each other and commence singing they shake away from all things carnal..."

In January 1860, Wood wrote about his experiences with a severe New England winter:

"...as a specemen of the frost I will add what I never experienced in my life before the nails would freeze to our hands if you happened to set the side of your hand on the nails the would stick there as many as could touch your skin... but when I took it off it brought only the thin skin with it....and the made awful sore places on your hand..."

John Wood's narrative of the famous Pemberton Mill fire in Lawrence, Massachusetts on Tuesday, January 10, 1860, is, with the exception of newspaper accounts, one of the few first-hand reportings of this tragedy:

"...the calamity I mentioned....was a cotton mill 5 storys high falling whilst all the hands was at work ...I believe it was not more than one or two minutes from the commencement to being laid in a heap of ruins....whist labouring to get out the wounded and those buried beneath the ruins about nine o'clock at night a man by accident....put his lantern down in the debris the better to see his way when coming in contact with some hard substance he broke it and being charged with camphine....it immediately exploded and set the whole fabric in flames those that was alive and unhurt wich might have been saved were burned alive....I must say of all the sicking spectacles I ever saw nothing could compare with this ...one family I was aquanted and went to see had a boy working in the weave room or basement story of the mill he escaped unhurt though buried underneath the whole fabric he told me that he saw the shafting all coming down and he crept under his loom and in a moment when he opened his eyes all was darkness he began to grope about and found a woman some men had got hold off and was getting out so he clung to her hoops and was draged out with her...."

The Storyteller

John Wood's powers of observation and storytelling ability as evidenced in these written narratives to his brother Mark and brother-in-law Thomas Tattersall, were puzzling, given his humble background. During a trip to Bury this past June, I researched his early life in England. In examining birth and marriage records of the 1830's, 40's and 50's, it was evident that he was the only member of his family who knew how to read or write. His family members were uneducated people and would sign papers or documents with their mark, indicated by an X.

Education given to the children of working class parents in Lancashire mill towns was very deficient. According to *The Report of the Manchester Statistical Society on the State of Education in the Borough of Bury, Lancashire*, published in 1835, only 1 out of 24 children was receiving any kind of an education in Bury. Some mill owners built schools for the children of their employees, as did Mr. Greg, the owner of the Hud Carr Mill where John's family worked as cotton spinners, weavers and piecers during the 1820's, 30's and 40's. The *Manchester Statistical Society* reports that by the early 1830's, the Hud Carr works school was attended by 41 children. John Wood probably attended that school, although no class records exist. The children were taught reading, writing and arithmetic. The schoolmistress received a small weekly wage from Mr. Greg in addition to payments from the students or scholars, as they were called.

A study of the 1841 census, the first in England, reveals that almost 80% of working males and 60% of working females were employed in the cotton mills in Bury. Given these figures, it was unusual for John to have become a cabinet-maker. However, as the youngest child in the family, John's parents may have been able to allow him more opportunities than they were able to achieve for themselves. Any education, no matter how sparse, would provide him with more advancement and a better standard of living.

John would later have served a 7 year apprenticeship, guaranteed by a benefactor or master craftsman in cabinet-making. As an apprentice, he would have made his own tool box and purchased the necessary tools, boots, and clothes. Upon completion of this period, he would have earned a deed of apprenticeship or pupillage.

The Immigration to Lowell

In 1842, while in England, John had married Hannah Wood, who died shortly after the birth of their daughter, Jane, in 1851. His second marriage to Margaret Warburton, a widow, was probably a marriage of convenience, as she had a young son and he needed someone to care for his 4 young children.

John Wood probably immigrated to Lowell during the early summer of 1858. He was 39 years old. He would have sailed from Liverpool, not a great distance from Bury, where he was living at the time. No emigration records were kept for the port of departure, but he probably entered the United States at the port of Boston or at one of the other

smaller ports on the New England coast. We can only conjecture that he came here to try to improve his situation.

In Wood's letter of 1858 to his brother in England, he requested that mail be sent to him care of William Robinson, Machinist, in Lowell. Research has revealed that William Robinson was married to Ann Spencer, one of three daughters born to Sarah Spencer, John Wood's sister. Sarah had immigrated to Lowell sometime after 1842. John apparently found employment with the Merrimack Corporation and was able to stay temporarily with his sister and her family. From reading his letters, we can see that he was sending money home on a regular basis for his children's support. We do not yet know what happened to Margaret.

In September of 1861, while living in Lowell, John married Mary Rock, who had immigrated from Canada. In 1862 and 1863 there is no record of John and Mary Wood living in Lowell. It is possible that they went to Canada, where her family was living. During the Civil War years, life in Lowell was quite grim with regular work very difficult to obtain.

From 1864 to 1866, John was living at North Franklin Court and was listed as a carpenter in the Lowell City Directory. Edwin Wood, his only son, was listed as living with him in the 1865 Census and 1866 City Directory. John's wife Mary died of dropsy in February of 1866. Edwin disappeared from the area soon after and his whereabouts were unknown. In 1868, John was boarding at 220 Merrimack Street and working as a cabinet-maker at 135 Central Street.

The Tragic and Untimely Death

Out of work for several months, dispirited and despondent over the deaths of his mother and daughter in England, as well as the death of his wife Mary, John Wood left his boardinghouse after midnight on August 11, 1869. In the early hours of the morning, he drowned himself in the Merrimack Canal, a few feet from Huntington Hall and the old railroad depot (near the present Dutton and Merrimack Street arch). He was forty-nine years old. When his body was discovered several hours later, it was brought to the home of Mrs. Senior, the owner of the boardinghouse. There, Reverend Theodore Edson, rector of St. Anne's Church, prayed over his body and, later:

"...At grave side I read De Pro fundia and a very qualified committal and collects--and the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

(diary entry of Rev. Edson for Wednesday, August 11, 1869)

John Wood was buried in the New Burial Ground (later Edson Cemetery) where his wife Mary was also buried.

In his letter of May 1859, John gave his nephew Mark the following advice. Unfortunately, overburdened and distraught, these words of wisdom were not able to carry him through his own series of tragedies:

"...don't let him lack spirit wich is the greatest curse a man could be troubled with.....whatever you do infuse a dominant independent spirit in all your children and you will give them something superior to wealth to carry them through this world..."

The Exhibit

The tools on display belonged to L. Fletcher, possibly a co-worker of John's from the same craft guild in Bury. John's tools would have been very similar to these. Unfortunately, we have not been able to locate them. After his death, his boardinghouse mistress, Mrs. Betsey Senior, petitioned the court to be allowed to sell his possessions in order to recoup her losses for back rent that John owed her.

The tools date from the 1840's. The three planes, known as paring tools, are made of beech wood and are for smoothing and moulding the wood. The 1 1/2" rebate plane was used for recessing grooves into the wood, the box plane was for smoothing and the shooting plane was used for coarse work. The auger and gimlet were boring tools.

On display are enlarged copies of the letters, photographs of Bury, England and lithographs of Lowell, Mass. The cases contain the original letters John sent to his family as well as historic photographs, documents and records.

A video of a storytelling performance with George Capaccio as John Wood is available for viewing. This performance was made possible through Cultural Program Support from the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission. The videotaping of Capaccio's performance is provided through a grant from the Massachusetts Arts Lottery, as administered by the Lowell Arts Council.

The Researcher

Helene Desjarlais has lived in Lowell for over twenty years and is currently Director of Development at the University of Lowell Center for the Arts. She previously served for eight years as Administrative Director of the Merrimack Repertory Theatre.

Helene has always been interested in some of the lesser known aspects of Lowell's history, and began to research John Wood's letters upon the urging of Martha Mayo, Librarian at the Center for Lowell History. Lengthy correspondence with Kenneth Walker, Dorothy Clarke, Edna Dally and Mrs. Rita Hirst, resulted in additional information on the Wood family. A recent grant from the Cabot Trust enabled Helene to travel to Bury this past June to research John Wood's early life. Some of the research, photos, documents and artifacts gathered on that trip make up part of this exhibit and display.

A confirmed Anglophile, Helene is the author of several articles on her adventures in England, and hopes to retire within the next few years into the quiet of the Dorset countryside.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to the following individuals for providing me with information during my research into John Wood's life, in Lowell as well as in Bury, England.

Martha Mayo

Kenneth Walker

Edna Bickerdike Dally

(John Wood's great-great niece)

Ruth Jolly

(John Wood's great-great-great niece)

Mrs. Carl Gilchrist

(a descendant, by marriage, of Sarah Spencer)

Mrs. Rita Hirst, Reference Librarian, Bury,

England Public Library

Kevin Mullay, Archivist, Bury, England

Dorothy Clarke

Walter Hickey

Lowell Historic Preservation Commission

University of Lowell

Lowell Arts Council

Lowell Historical Society

A Note to Visitors

There is a great significance in minor historical documents and a need to retain even an ordinary person's historical perspective of a specific time and place. Through these three surviving letters, we have been made aware of the quality of life experienced by one ordinary English immigrant to Lowell over 130 years ago and have been able to research and develop a full portrait of this rather insignificant yet extraordinary individual. One man's life will now be remembered and recorded through his own words and personal observations.

THE PATRICK J. MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER

The mission of the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center is to "tell the human story found in the history of the United States as an industrial nation, especially by concentrating on the lives of the working people of Lowell, Massachusetts."

The Center, which opened in 1989, is named in honor of Lowell's former Superintendent of Schools who developed the concept of an urban park focused on Lowell's unique heritage.

This former boardinghouse which housed Boott Mill employees from about 1837 was rehabilitated by the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, an agency of the U. S. Department of the Interior. It is an appropriate setting for the Lowell National Historical Park's interpretive exhibits on the theme of the Working People: Mill Girls, Immigrants, and Labor. The Center also houses the University of Lowell Center for Lowell History, and the University's Downtown Center for Continuing Education which offers year-round classes. A wide variety of cultural programs is also offered throughout the year at the Center.

UNIVERSITY OF LOWELL CENTER FOR THE ARTS

The University of Lowell Center for the Arts co-sponsors Temporary Exhibits at the Mogan Cultural Center through its Cooperative Agreement with the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission.

The mission of the Center for the Arts is to support and present the performing and visual arts for the University of Lowell campus and for the community of Greater Lowell. For information, call (508) 934-4444.

TEMPORARY EXHIBITS

Any organization, group, or individual interested in developing an exhibit at the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center on its themes, should contact the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission at 222 Merrimack Street, Suite 310, Lowell, MA 01852, (508) 458-7653. A member of the Community Exhibits Committee will then contact you and, if approved, will recommend your proposal to the Mogan Community Advisory Board.